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TAGS: [KJUS](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: COLOMBIA'S EFFORTS TO ENSURE FAIR ELECTIONS IN
SUCRE & CORDOBA

SUMMARY

¶11. During a pre-elections visit to Sucre and Cordoba departments, politicians, local authorities, and victims, groups all told us the safer environment created by the demobilization of paramilitaries resulted in a dramatic increase in the participation of newer political parties. However, some victims, groups and candidates said they still feel unsafe when conducting their campaigns because of activity by the FARC and new criminal groups in the area. A culture of vote-buying persists, and questions remain about the sources of financing for some local campaigns. To address these concerns and create the right environment for free and fair elections, the GOC and local authorities are investigating denunciations of fraud and corruption, providing protection to candidates, and monitoring polling places. END SUMMARY.

NEW SPACE FOR PARTICIPATION

¶12. Col. Jorge Rodriguez, the Commander on the National Police (CNP) in Sucre, said the demobilization of paramilitaries accomplished through Colombia's Justice and Peace process created a much safer environment for political participation in an area formerly plagued by violence, extortions, and intimidation. Uriel Toro at the national police office in Cordoba said the same was true for his department. As a result, newer political parties like Polo Democratico Alternativo (PDA) are now openly opposing the traditional parties that have long held power in the region. Newer parties are differentiating themselves from elected officials that were arrested under charges of cooperation with former paramilitaries. PDA's mayoral candidate in San Onofre, Adil Jose Melendez, said this is a dramatic change from previous elections, in which only one candidate, backed by paramilitary groups, ran for office, while nobody else dared to challenge him. Alicia Pinzon, the current Registrar for elections in Cordoba, said this increased participation represents a major advance for democracy in the region.

SOME FEAR REMAINS

¶ 13. Conservative Party Senator for Sucre, Julio Manzur, said intimidation and threats no longer exist in his department, but Melendez said conducts his campaign under fear of reprisals from new criminal groups that are active in the area. Melendez said those new criminal groups have great interest in the local elections because the winner will have the power to enforce controls along a major route used for the illegal narcotics trade (or to look the other way).

Alvaro Emiro Petro, the PDA candidate for Governor in Cordoba, said that while he had not received any direct threats from new criminal groups, people working on his campaign and running on the PDA ticket for city council in Sincelejo had received written threats from the new criminal group that calls itself the Aguilas Negras. Patricia Rodriguez, Director of the Organization of American States, Special Mission to Support the Peace Process (MAPP/OAS) in Monteria, said a political organizer who was recruiting campesinos to campaign for Alberto Lizardo Gomez Revollo, the Liberal candidate for mayor of San Onofre, was killed in a rural area outside of San Onofre. She said his killers were probably FARC guerrillas who opposed Revollo. Jackeline Moguea, a victims' group leader and candidate for the City Council of San Onofre said local people report feeling intimidated by former paramilitaries who are now working as campaigners, since their history of violence is well-known in the area.

CULTURE OF VOTE-BUYING, CORRUPTION PERSISTS

¶ 14. Bishop and community leader Nel Beltran said extreme poverty in the region, coupled with a general lack of education about the democratic process, has created a culture

in which people look to politicians for handouts. PDA candidate Luis Benitez said the traditional party candidates distribute bags of cement, food, and even cash at the main marketplaces in Monteria. Campaign workers for Liberal Party candidate for Mayor of Monteria, Juan Carlos Lengua, admitted keeping petty cash on hand at their campaign headquarters and distributing small sums of money to about 300 campesinos per day. They also said they keep a physician on hand to tend to the peoples' health needs during campaign season, but claimed none of these benefits obligated people to vote for them. One campaign worker said all the parties distribute these benefits as "demonstrations that they care," and claimed that any candidate who did not do so would come in last. For this reason, few expect newer parties with less resources to capture a large percentage of the vote.

¶ 15. Petro said his campaign simply does not have the funds to compete with his wealthy opponents from traditional parties. He claimed the Liberals and Conservatives in Monteria were outspending his campaign by ten to one on publicity, not counting the additional cash payments and other goods they are distributing. PDA representatives also claimed the local newspaper, ZZZ, refused to sell them advertising space or give them any kind of coverage. Melendez said he must conduct his campaign on foot, as he doesn't have funds for a car. Both of these PDA candidates said the first goal of their campaign is to convince people they should vote for candidates based on their platforms, rather than their pocketbooks.

¶ 16. Questions also remain about the financing of some local campaigns. A September 9 article in Colombia's leading daily newspaper, El Tiempo, reported that several candidates in Cordoba and Sucre are receiving political (and possibly financial) support from former officials who have been jailed because of suspicion of links with former paramilitaries. The article accused the jailed officials of trying to hand-pick their successors in order to continue exerting influence in the region. U party candidate Jorge Carlos Barraza did not deny meeting with jailed officials, claiming it was his "Christian duty" to visit those in prison. Liberal party candidate for Governor of Cordoba, Marta Saenz

even published a full-page ad in the local newspaper stating her alliance with the jailed Cordoba officials. She told us she believed them to be innocent of any wrong-doing and that there was nothing wrong with receiving support from them, since they have not yet been proven guilty.

GOC TAKES STEPS TO ENSURE FAIR ELECTIONS

¶7. PDA and U Party candidates accused incumbents of using government subsidies to obtain votes by threatening people they would lose their unemployment or housing benefits if there was a change in the ruling party. However, ZZZ at the Inspector General's office (Procuraduria) in Monteria, said she had received no official denouncements of such activity. She said the Procuraduria will investigate any official denouncements it receives regarding government officials currently in office, while the Attorney General's office (Fiscalia) investigates all claims of vote-buying by aspiring candidates.

¶8. The national police in both Sucre and Cordoba said they collaborate with local military forces to organize security for political candidates while they are campaigning. Col. Rodriguez said the police accompany candidates when they travel to smaller towns, and coordinate with the military to provide increased protection. Toro, like Rodriguez said his office is committed to keeping the candidates safe during elections, and that so far, there have been no problems regarding the candidates.

¶9. In order to assure unbiased enforcement of voting procedures, the National Registrar re-assigned local registrars from their home departments to posts in other departments. These newly arrived registrars are currently training elections workers to be vigilant for voting fraud and to enforce strict controls. Each registrar's office will be checking records to ensure that everyone votes only in their designated district. In order to avoid complaints that

people are using cell phone cameras to take photos of their ballot and receive payments later for their votes, the registrars will be requiring all cell phones be turned off before entering the voting booth.

¶10. Also in order to investigate charges of illicit funding and over-spending in political campaigns, the National Elections Commission assigned three special magistrates to each department to analyze financial records of all political campaigns. These new investigative units were created on August 28, 2006, and they plan to issue reports of their findings every month. The three magistrates recently assigned to Sucre said it may be difficult to reach any conclusions prior to the October 28 elections, but they will report any evidence they do find. These new measures demonstrate the new level of commitment the GOC is placing on ensuring free and fair elections in October.

Brownfield